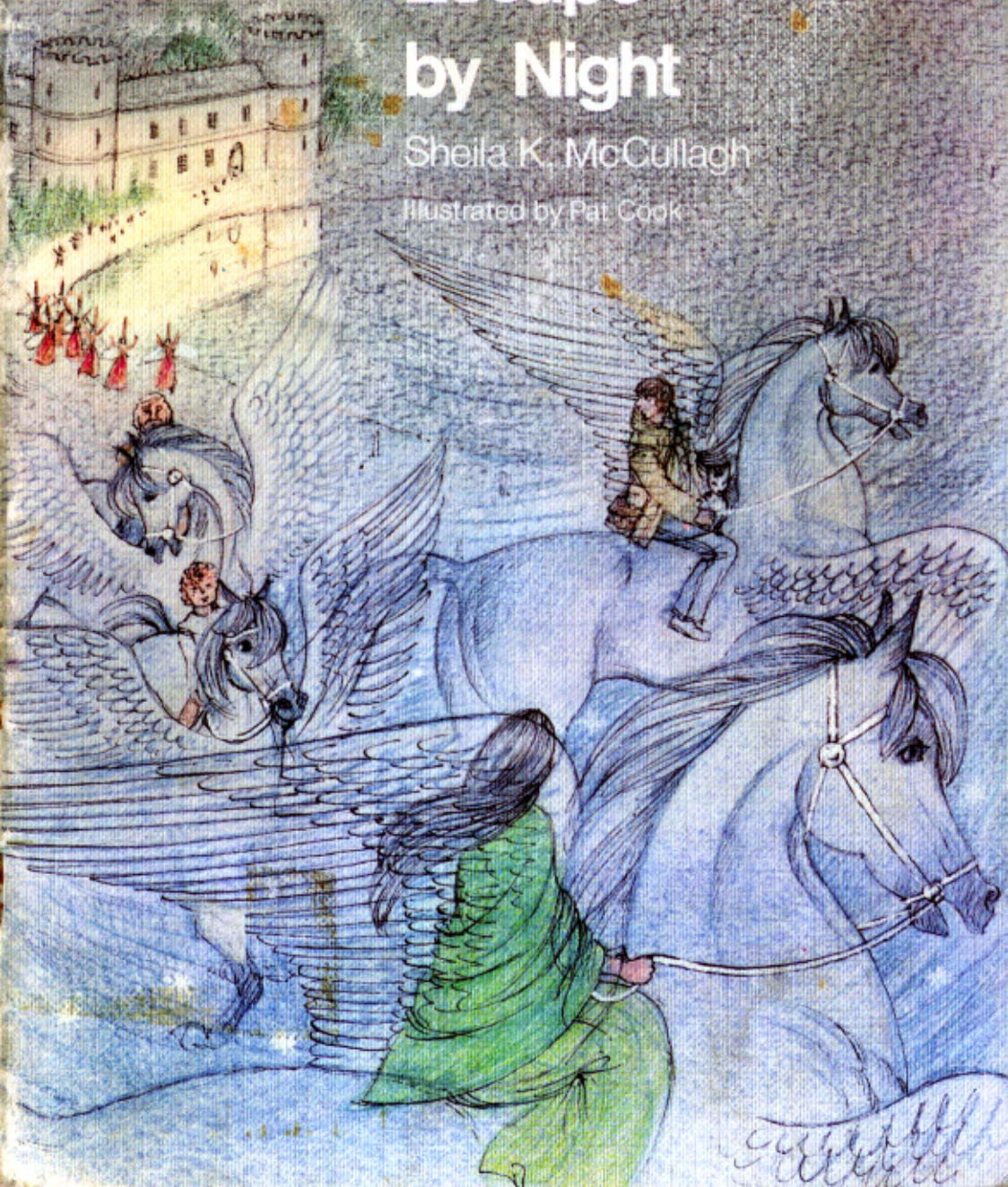


Tim and the Hidden People

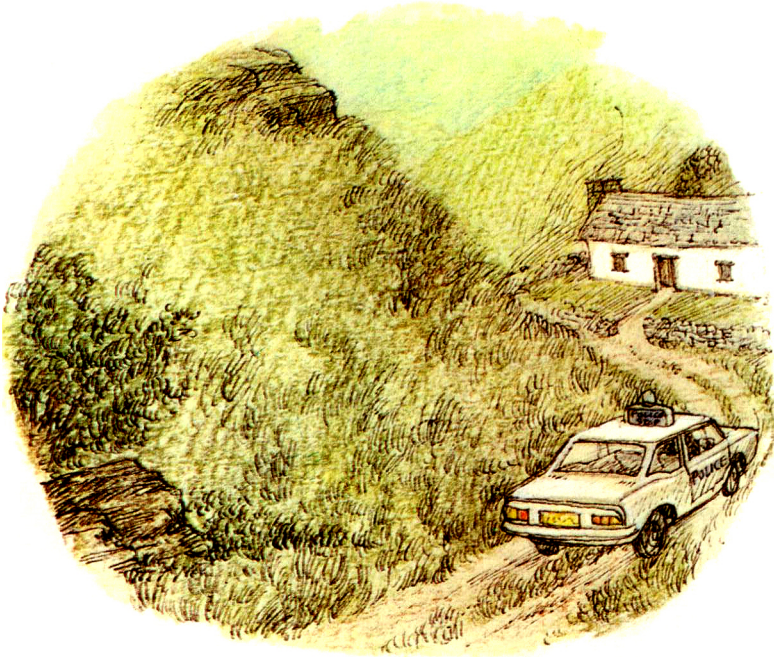
Escape by Night

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



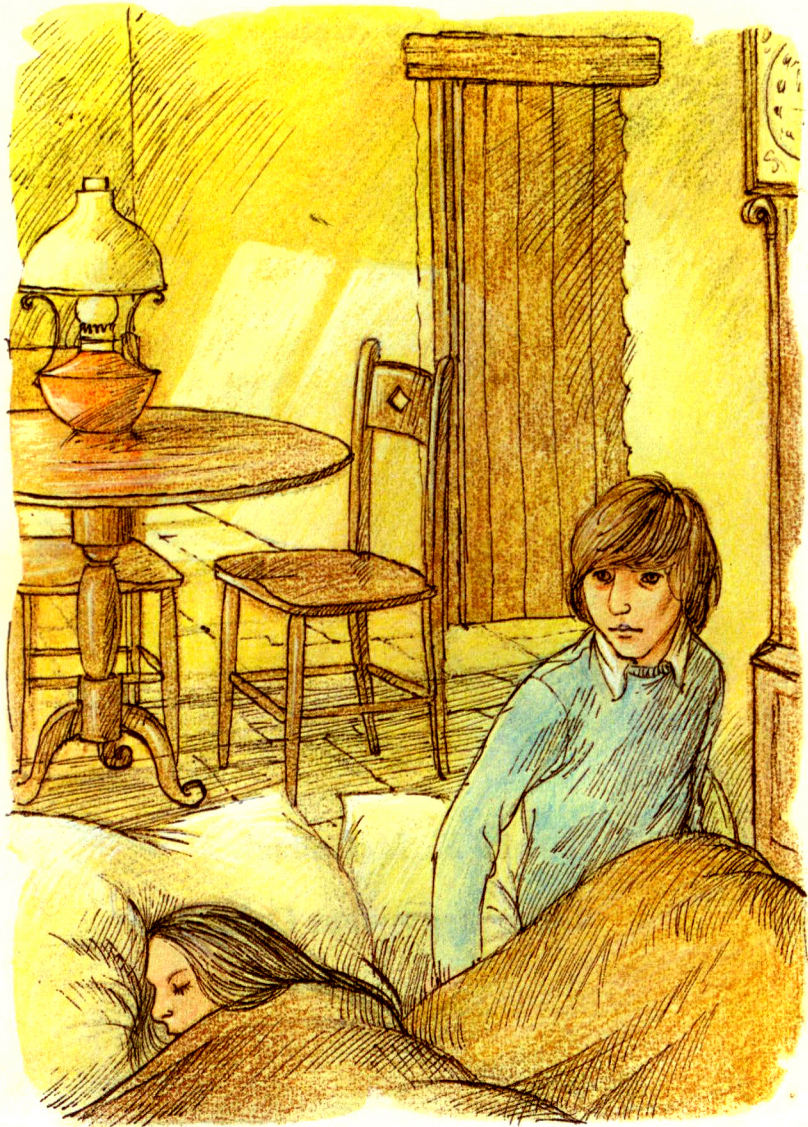
Escape by Night



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Tim woke up to the smell of bacon frying, with the sun streaming in through the window of Alan's cottage. He sat up, pushed back his blanket, and got to his feet. Nicola and Jeremy were still sleeping.

Tim went into the little kitchen, and found Alan Tremaine breaking eggs into a frying pan.

"Hallo, Tim," said Alan. "Give Nicola and Jeremy a shake, will you? Breakfast's ready."

As Tim went back to wake Nicola, Sebastian jumped off a chair and ran over to him. Tim picked Sebastian up, and the little cat began to purr loudly.

Nicola sat up. "Hallo, Tim," she said. "Is Alan Tremaine back?"

"He's cooking breakfast," said Tim.

Nicola saw Jeremy still sleeping. She picked up her pillow, and tossed it at him.

Jeremy woke with a start, and sat up.

"What is it?" he said. "Are the witches here?"

"Only breakfast," said Alan, coming in with the tray. "Come and sit down."

They sat down at the table. Sebastian jumped up on to it. Alan set the plates in front of them, put down a saucer of milk for Sebastian, and sat down himself.

There were eggs and bacon and oatcakes and honey, and they ate until there was nothing left.

Tim set down his tea, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he remembered that Aunt May always told him not to do that. He looked quickly at Alan, but if Alan had noticed, he didn't seem to mind. Tim's thoughts went back to Aunt May. He thought of her, sitting in the kitchen at home. He wondered if she missed him.

Tim looked up, and saw Alan watching him.

"Thinking of home, Tim?" asked Alan.

Tim gave himself a little shake. "I've got to think of getting to the Cove of the Dark Tower," he said.

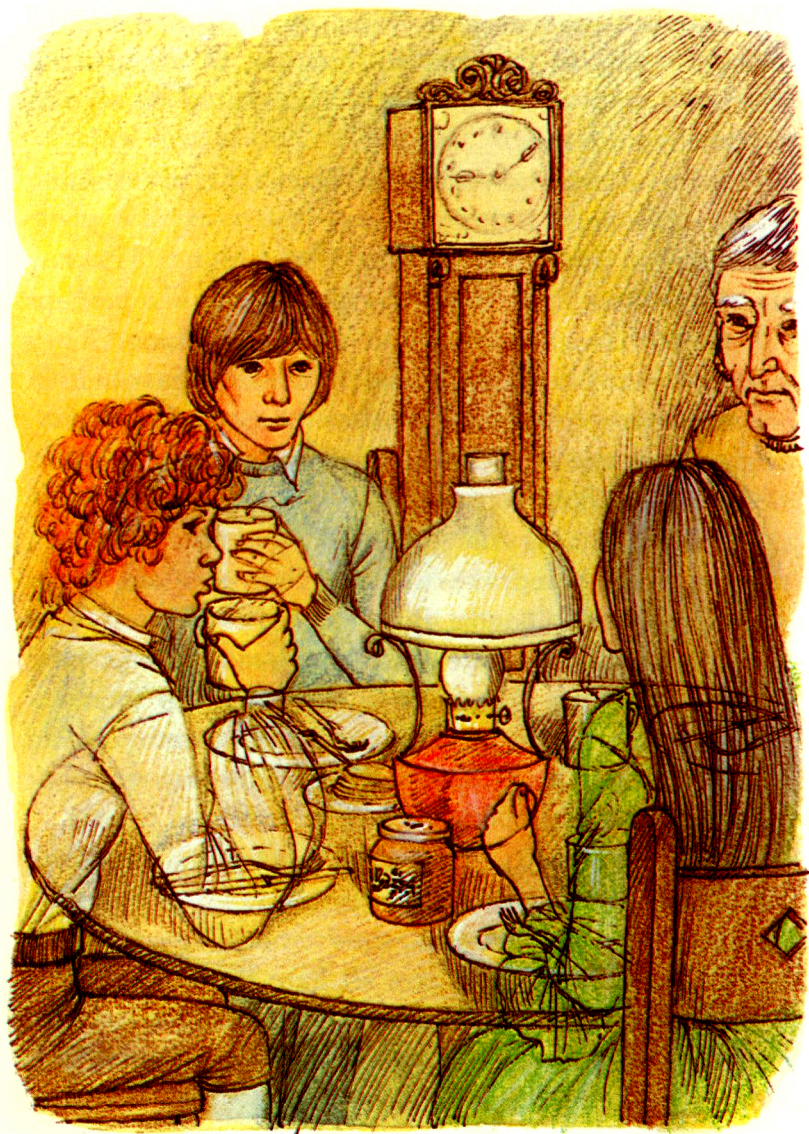
Alan nodded. "Yes, you must think of that first," he said. "It's still a long way to the Dark Tower, and every road to the north will be watched. Mandrake may not know where you are at the moment, and he doesn't know where you're meeting Grandfather Strome. But he knows you're not far away, and he knows you're travelling north."

Nicola shivered. "Can't we stay here for a bit?" she said.

Alan shook his head. "If you stay here, it won't be long before Mandrake finds out where you are," he said. "The sooner you leave here, the better. But you can't go by the roads."

"We'd never find our way across country," said Tim.

"I know that," said Alan. "But I think I know a way to send you north."



He looked hard at Tim. Then, suddenly, he smiled. “You’ve come so far, and you got out of Mandrake’s Castle on your own,” he said. “You should be able to ride the night-horses.”

“Ride the night-horses?” cried Nicola, her eyes shining with excitement. “But how can we?”

“We shall have to steal them,” said Alan. “Tim saw the witches last night, riding the night-horses – or perhaps the night-mares. It comes to the same thing. They swept down to Mandrake’s Castle. They must have hidden the night-horses in the caves below the castle for the day. Night-horses die in the sunlight. But last night they had tied them on long ropes to posts along the lake. I saw them there, eating the grass. They should be there tonight, too. Mandrake will see that someone keeps watch on them, of course. But he won’t expect you to go back to the castle, and he’ll send every man he can spare to keep watch on the roads to the north. So there’s a good chance that we can steal the horses, and you can ride north on them. I wish I could come with you, but I can’t leave Grandmother Roon.”

“But won’t they take us to the witches?” asked Tim. “They’re witches’ horses.”

Alan shook his head. “No, they’re not,” he said. “The night-horses and night-mares all hate the witches. The witches often try to catch them. The night-horses have to spend part of the night on the ground, eating grass. The witches steal up on them in the darkness.”

“The witches have magic reins and magic bridles made of silver. If they can slip them over the horses’ heads, the horses have to do what the witches say. The wind witches are always trying to catch the night-horses, because they can’t ride broomsticks. But the horses get away whenever they can. I said that we would steal the horses. I should have said that we’ll set them free.”

“But will the horses let *us* ride them?” asked Tim.

“The witches’ reins and bridles are still on them,” said Alan. “They never take them off. They have bound the horses’ wings to their sides with silver cords, so that they cannot fly. If we cut the cords, but keep the bridles on the horses, you will be able to ride them. I know how to speak to them. I shall tell them to take you to the Cove of the Dark Tower.”

“If we can ride north on the night-horses,” asked Jeremy, “why can’t we ride them all the way to the island?”

“The sun would come up before you got there, and the horses would die,” said Alan.

He got up. “I’m going to take Grandmother Roon her breakfast,” he said. “I may even try to get some sleep. I was out most of the night. Don’t go outside the cottage, and tell me if you see anyone coming.”

Alan went into the kitchen, and a few minutes later he took a tray into the other room, and shut the door.

“What do we do now?” asked Jeremy.



“Let’s clear up, first,” said Tim. He started to stack the plates. He wondered if Aunt May was washing up, at home in The Yard. He often washed up for her.

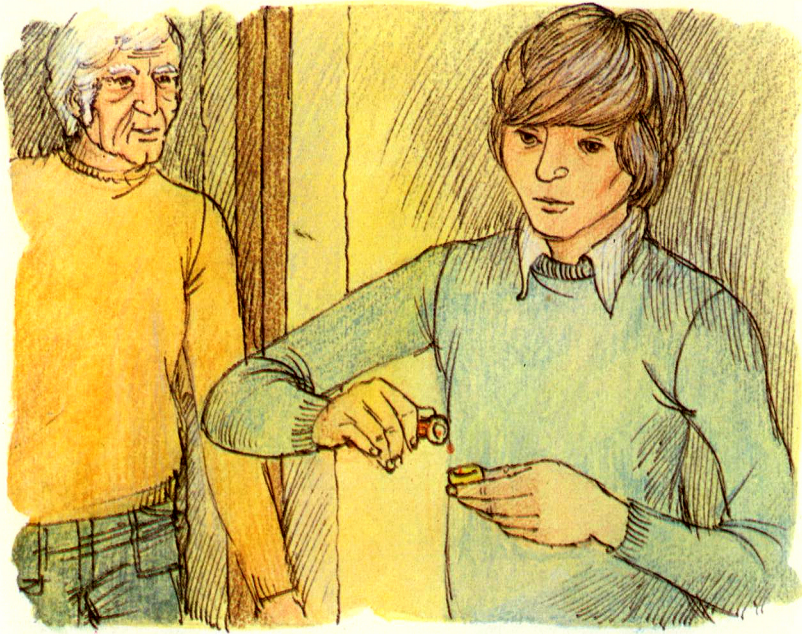
They went into the kitchen. Sebastian ran to the window by the front door of the cottage. He jumped up on the sill, and looked out over the moor.



They had finished washing up, and were just folding the blankets, when Sebastian gave a loud mew.

Tim ran to the window. A police car was coming slowly over the moor, along the track that led to the cottage.

"Tell Alan," Tim said to Jeremy.



He pulled out the glass bottle which Melinda had given him. He was pouring three red drops into the golden cap of the bottle, as Alan came out of the outer room.

“What’s that, Tim?” asked Alan.

“Melinda gave it to me. It makes me invisible,” said Tim. “Invisible to Ordinary Folk, that is. And I think I’d better be invisible for an hour or two. That police car is coming here.”

“Good,” said Alan. “That’ll save us a lot of trouble.”

They heard the car stop outside. The car door slammed, as someone got out of it. There was a knock on the door of the cottage.



“Go into the kitchen, all of you, just in case,” whispered Alan. “Even if the policeman can’t see you, I don’t want him to fall over you.”

They slipped quickly into the kitchen. Alan opened the door of the cottage.

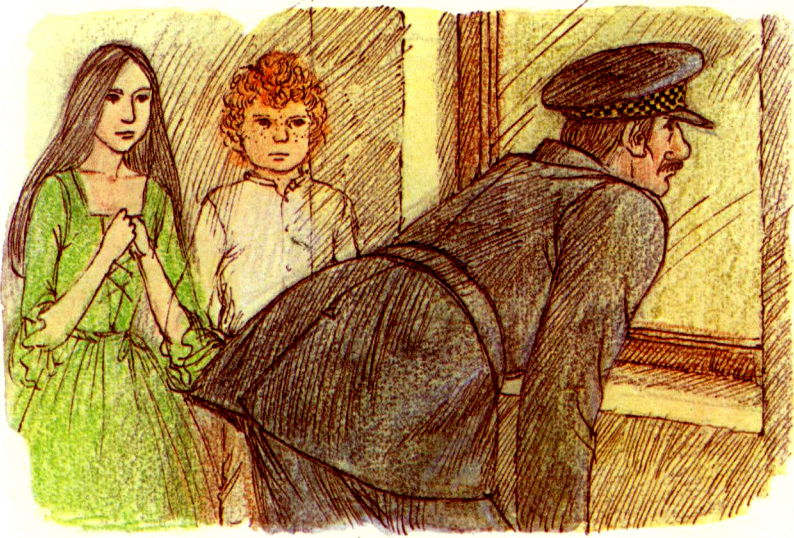
“Hallo,” they heard him say. “What can I do for you?”

Tim pulled the kitchen door shut. “What did Alan mean, ‘just in case’?” he whispered to Nicola.

“Just in case the policeman is one of the Strange Ones,” said Nicola. “If he was a Strange One, he could see us.”

“But a policeman couldn’t be,” said Tim.

“He might be,” said Nicola. “Anyone might be. But it isn’t very likely. We shall soon know.”



The kitchen door opened, and the policeman looked in.

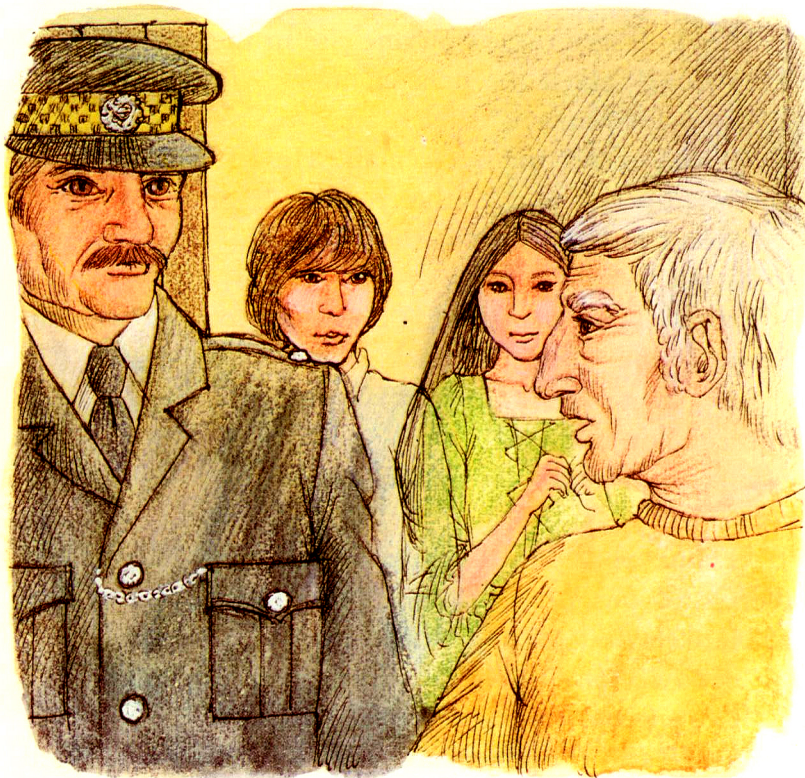
"I'll just take a look around in here as well, if you don't mind, Mr. Tremaine," he said. "The man who told us the boy was here seemed very sure about it."

He came into the kitchen. Tim, Nicola and Jeremy stood with their backs to the wall, and made themselves as flat as possible.

"You can look anywhere you like," said Alan, standing in the doorway.

It was plain that the policeman couldn't see the children. He walked across to the little window, nearly stepping on Jeremy's foot as he did so, and looked out.

There was nothing but the moor outside.



"I'll just take a look in the other room, if I may," said the policeman.

"Carry on," said Alan. He smiled at Tim.

"What are you smiling about?" asked the policeman quickly.

"I was just thinking that it's a good thing I live here and not you," said Alan. "There's not much room in the kitchen."

“Are you sure there’s no one else in the cottage, Mr. Tremaine?” asked the policeman.

“Look for yourself,” said Alan.

“I will,” said the policeman. He left the kitchen, and went across to the other room.

“Won’t he see Grandmother Roon?” Tim whispered to Nicola.

Nicola shook her head. “She’s one of the Hidden People,” she whispered back.

Alan went over to the fire. He was careful not to look at the children again.

In a few minutes, the policeman came out of the other room.

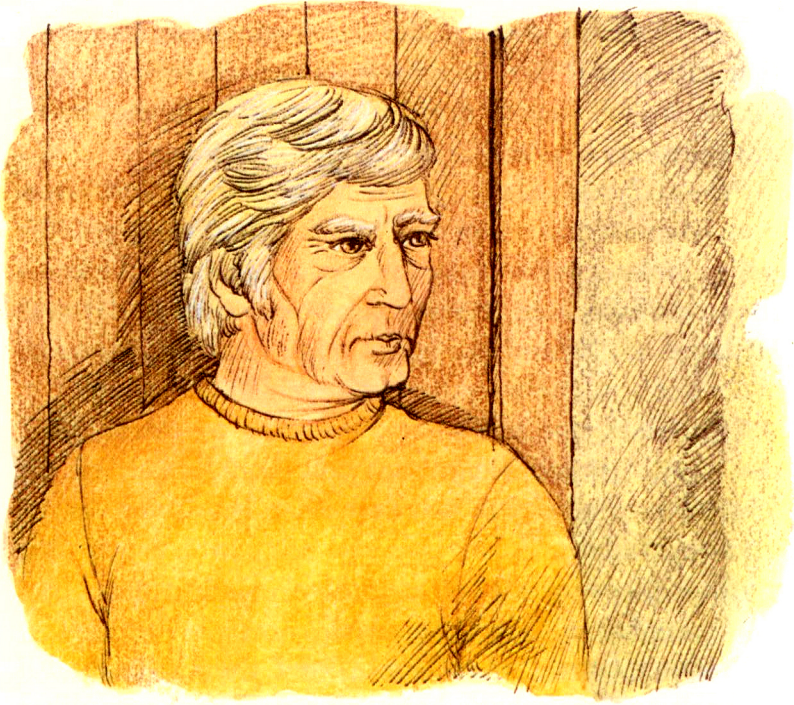
“Thank you, Mr. Tremaine,” he said. “I can see there’s no one here just now.” He looked at the pile of blankets and pillows on the chair.

“Been sleeping by the fire, have you?” he asked.

“I’ve a friend coming to stay,” said Alan.

“Yes?” said the policeman. “Ah, well, blankets do get a bit damp in these cottages sometimes. I’ll say goodbye now, Mr. Tremaine, but if you should see that boy, I’d be glad if you’d let us know. He’s not in any trouble himself, you know—at least, we don’t think so. But his Aunt is very worried about him, and we think he may be able to tell us something about a lorry that was hijacked. So we want to find him. Good-day.”

“Good-day,” said Alan, shutting the front door behind the policeman.



He stood by the door, listening, until the car started up, and drove away. Then he walked over to the fire. Tim, Nicola and Jeremy came out of the kitchen. Sebastian ran back to the window, and jumped up on the sill again. Tim was sure that he was keeping watch for them.

“Well, Tim, it was a good thing you were invisible,” said Alan. “He didn’t come here by chance. Someone told the police you’d been seen near here. I think it must have been Mandrake’s friends. Were you invisible, when Mandrake first saw you?”

Tim shook his head. "I hadn't been invisible for hours, then," he said. "Not since I telephoned the police, before I saw the witches. A drop of this stuff only makes me invisible for an hour."

"Good," said Alan. "Then Mandrake doesn't know that Melinda gave you the magic drink. He's got the police looking everywhere for you, and he doesn't know they won't be able to see you, even if they find you!" He laughed. "Mandrake isn't as clever as he thinks he is. We'll get you safely to the island yet."

"I'm—I'm not sure that I'm going to the island," said Tim. "I said I'd take Nicola and Jeremy to the Dark Tower. But I'm not sure that I'm going to the island with them."

Alan Tremaine looked at him.

"Going home, Tim?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Tim. "But I think perhaps I'll go back and see what's happening in The Yard. What did the policeman say about Aunt May?"

"He said that she's worried about you," said Alan. "And she's been doing everything she can to find you. She must want you back. If you do want to go back, Tim, I should go on the Ghost Bus, if I were you."

"What's the Ghost Bus?" asked Tim.

"There's a white bus that runs from the far north right down through Scotland, and then down the motorway, right down to the west of England," said Alan. "It leaves the north every night at sunset, and travels until the sun rises."

“The Strange Ones call it ‘the Ghost Bus’ because it’s white, and because it’s always full of Hidden People. The Ordinary Folk can’t see it, of course. You couldn’t travel on it in the ordinary way, but you can if you’re invisible.”

“But how do I get on it?” asked Tim.

“Go back to the nearest road, when you’ve seen the children off from the Dark Tower,” said Alan. “It runs down that road. Let’s see your map, and I’ll show you.”

Tim pulled out his map.

“There’s the Cove of the Dark Tower, and there’s the road,” said Alan. “You can catch the Ghost Bus anywhere along there. Make sure you’re invisible, and flag it down, the way you’d stop an ordinary bus. You can get off whenever you like. You just pull the bell, and the bus will stop for you. It will take you a long way down south, Tim, and then you can hitch-hike home.”

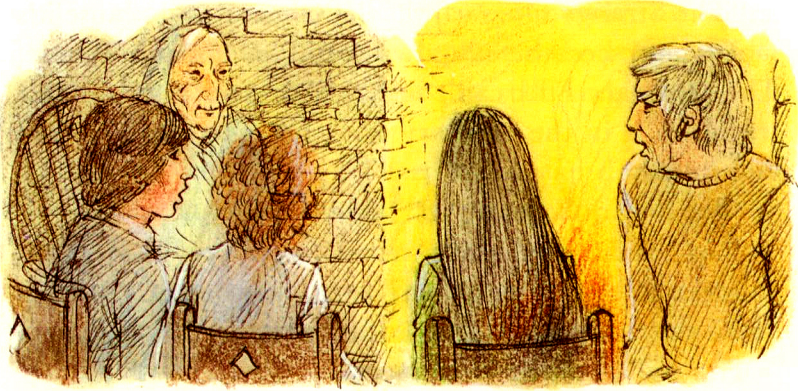
“Won’t you come with us, Tim?” asked Nicola. “Grandfather Strome will take you with us, and we can all be together on the island.”

“I don’t know, Nicola,” said Tim. “You see, I’m one of the Ordinary Folk most of the time.”

“But that doesn’t matter,” said Nicola. “You’ve got the silver coin.”

“I know,” said Tim. “But I keep thinking about Aunt May. I keep wondering about what’s happening in The Yard. I’ll have to think.”

“Don’t worry about it now,” said Alan. “Let’s have another cup of tea.”



They spent the rest of the day sitting round the fire, talking or singing songs. Alan helped Grandmother Roon back to her chair in front of the fire, and they could all see how much she enjoyed listening to them.

They had supper early. The sun set and the light began to fade from the sky.

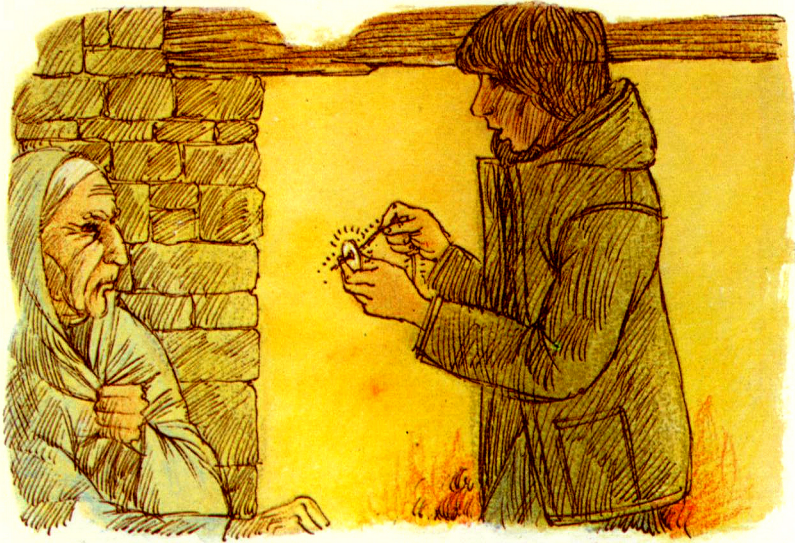
“It’s time to go,” said Alan.

Tim put on his jacket. Alan went into the kitchen. He came back with packets of bread and cheese. Tim put them in his bag.

When Tim turned to say “Goodbye” to Grandmother Roon she took off her silver chain, and handed it to him, pointing to his chest.

“She wants you to put the silver coin on the chain, Tim,” said Alan. “It’s a very good idea. You might lose it, if you leave it on the string. The silver chain is magic. You can’t lose that, if it’s been given to you.”

“But it’s Grandmother Roon’s chain,” said Tim.



Grandmother Roon smiled at him, and put the chain into his hands.

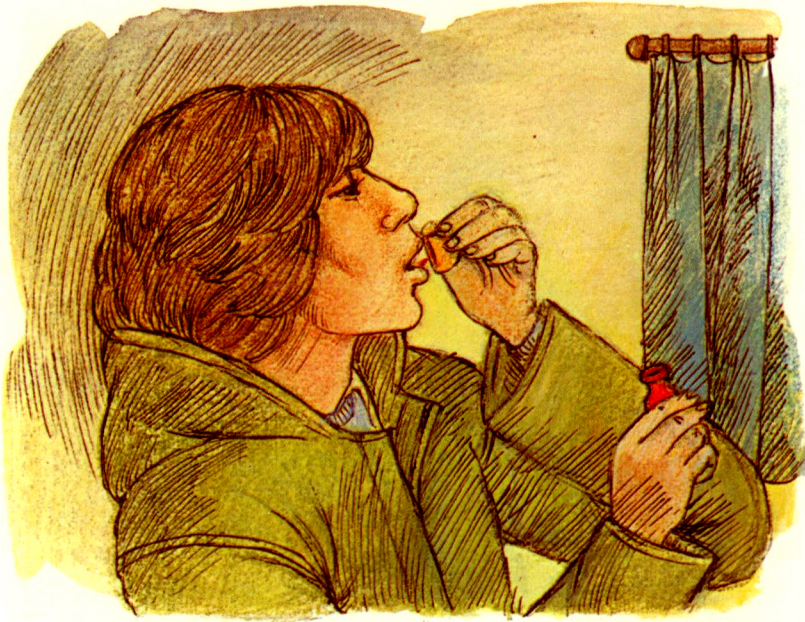
“You take it, Tim,” said Alan. “You mustn’t lose the coin.”

Tim took the chain. He pulled out the silver coin and slipped the end of the chain through it. There was a fastener at the end of the chain. Tim fastened the ends of the chain. Then he cut the string and pulled it out. He put the silver chain round his neck, and dropped the coin back under his clothes.

“Thank you very much,” he said.

Grandmother Roon nodded and smiled.

Sebastian jumped down from the window. Nicola pulled her shawl around her. They were ready to leave.



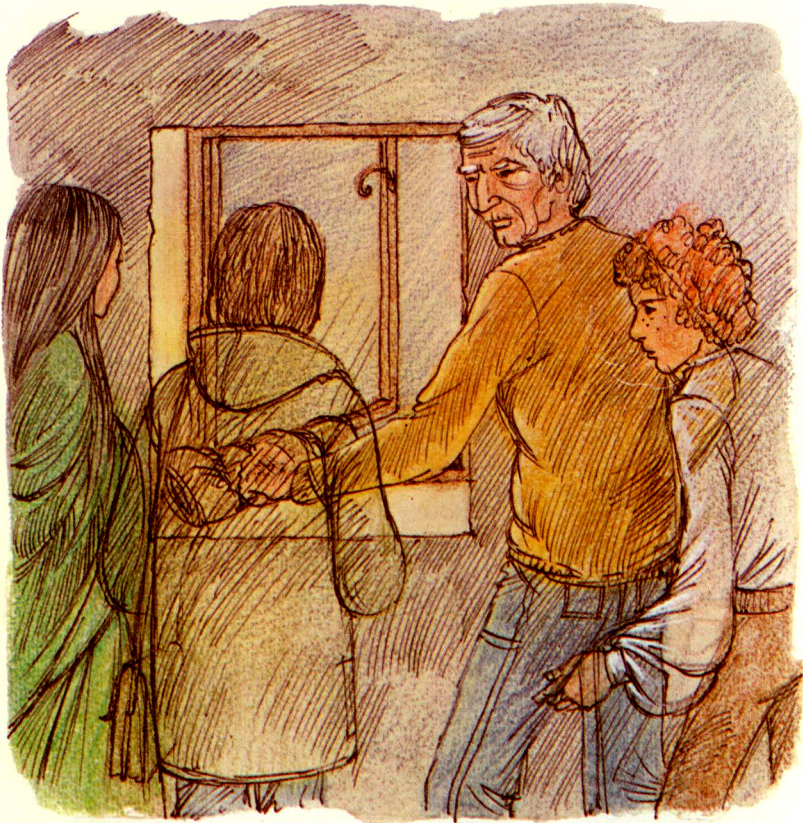
“You’d better take some more drops, Tim,” said Alan. “The horses will be much less frightened of you, if you look more like the Hidden People. And when you’ve taken those drops, you look just like one of them.”

Tim took out Melinda’s bottle, poured some of the magic drink into the gold top, and drank it.

“We’ll go out at the back,” said Alan. “You never know who may be watching the front door.”

He drew the curtains, lit the lamp, and set it on the table.

“I shan’t be long,” he said to Grandmother Roon. “Come on, you three. This way.”



Alan led the way into the kitchen, and opened the little window at the back. Then he picked up a sack, tied with a long bit of rope.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll have a look around."

Still holding the sack, he climbed through the window, and crept along to the end of the cottage. He was back in a minute or two.

“Come on,” he whispered. “But don’t make a sound. I think there’s someone up on the hill, watching the front door.”

Nicola slipped out of the window. Jeremy followed, and then Tim.

“This way,” whispered Alan. “Keep down as low as you can, and follow me.”

He led the way to a ditch a few yards from the back of the cottage, and dropped down into it. The others followed him. The ditch was surprisingly deep. Thick heather grew along the sides, almost meeting overhead. It was like a secret passage across the moor.

Alan put his fingers to his lips, and moved off along the ditch, without making a sound. Nicola followed him. Then came Jeremy. Tim came last, with Sebastian at his heels.

After a time the ditch swung to the right, and they seemed to be going up hill. At last they came to a place where the ditch widened. There was a shelf of big stones at one side. Alan stopped. “I think I’ll just take a look,” he whispered.

He stepped up on the shelf, and pushed his head up through the heather. He dropped back almost at once.

“Just as I thought,” he said. “There’s a man watching the cottage. But he hasn’t seen us.”

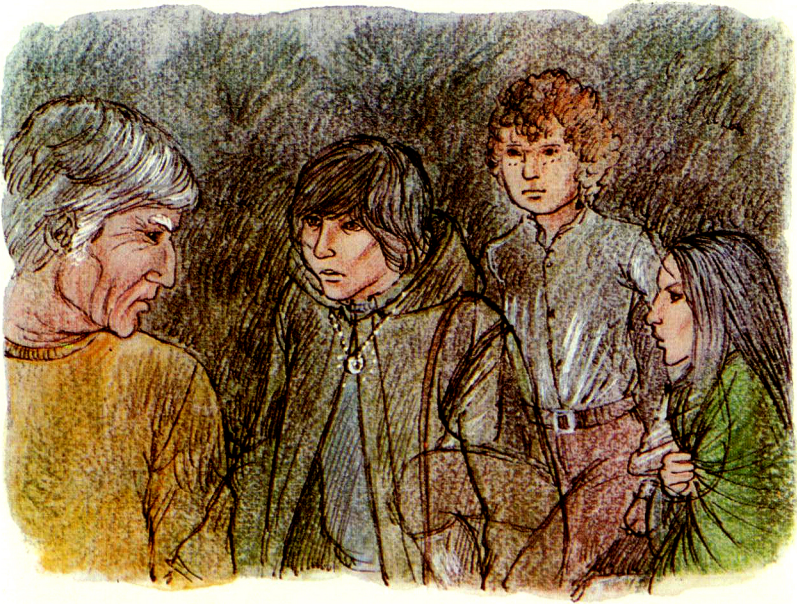
“Can I look?” asked Tim.

Alan nodded. “Keep your head down,” he whispered.

Tim stepped on the stone shelf, and looked out.



They had come up a little hill, and the cottage lay below them. Tim could see the track leading to the front door. A man was sitting by the track, leaning against a big stone and looking down towards the cottage. It was the man who had taken them to the room in the castle tower.



Tim dropped back into the ditch.

"We saw him in the castle," he whispered.

Alan nodded. "I thought he was one of Mandrake's men," he said softly. "Come on."

They followed the ditch for a long way, until at last it ended in another stone shelf. Alan climbed out first. They followed him, and found themselves in the pine trees by the road.

"This way," said Alan, leading them through the trees.

He looked up and down the road. No one was there, and they ran across quickly, and into the trees on the other side.



Alan led them along a little track through the pine wood. It was very dark under the trees. Alan and Nicola and Jeremy and Sebastian all seemed to be able to see in the dark, but Tim bumped into trees and fell over stones until Alan took him by the arm, and led him along like a blind man. Tim was glad when at last they came to the end of the trees, and he saw the moonlight shining like a silver pathway on the lake ahead of them.



They stood still in the shadow of the wood, looking out on the lake. Tim heard Nicola catch her breath. Seven dark blue horses, each with a shining silver bridle, and silver reins tied round their necks, were eating the grass along the shore.



There were seven wooden posts by the water, and each horse was tied to a post by a long silver cord. Long silver cords were tied around all the horses, too, holding their wings to their sides.

“The night-horses!” breathed Nicola. “The night-horses!”

“Sh!” whispered Alan. He pointed to one side. Tim looked. He could just make out a dark shape under a tree.

“The watchman,” whispered Alan in his ear. “Wait here.”

Alan was gone like a shadow. The others stood without moving, watching the dark shape.

There was a sudden cry from the watchman, and they saw a shadow drop from the tree on top of him. Then they heard Alan calling.

“Here, Tim. Quickly!”

Tim ran to the tree. He found Alan holding the watchman down. Alan had got his sack over the man’s head. His knee was on the watchman’s back.

“Pull the sack down, and tie the rope round him,” said Alan. “Quickly. There’ll be others here soon.”

Tim pulled the sack down over the man’s arms, and wound the rope around him. He used the ends to tie the man’s hands behind his back.

“Good,” said Alan. “Now for the horses.”

They ran across to where the horses stood, watching them with wide, dark eyes. Nicola and Jeremy came running across the grass.

Alan pulled out a knife, and cut the rope around the wings of the nearest horse.

“On you get, quickly,” he cried to Nicola.

He spoke to the horse in some strange way that Tim didn’t understand, and the horse stood still while Nicola scrambled on to his back, and untied the reins.





Alan cut the rope that held the horse to the post. The horse spread its great wings, ran a few steps, and took off into the air.

“Now Jeremy,” cried Alan, running to the next horse. A few moments later, Jeremy was on the horse’s back, and the horse was free.

“Tim,” cried Alan. Tim ran to the nearest horse, and climbed on its back. He untied the reins, as Sebastian took a flying leap, and landed on the horse’s back in front of him. Alan cut the horse free.

Tim saw the great wings spread out, and felt the horse lift up into the air. He looked down. Alan was running from horse to horse below him. He was cutting the ropes, and cutting away the reins and bridles. One after another, the horses leapt up into the air.

Tim heard a shout, and looked over towards Mandrake's Castle. Men were running out of the castle with flaming torches in their hands. Tim could see the witches among them with their red skirts, and their long silver cloaks flying out behind them as they ran.

Alan cut the ropes which fastened the last horse, flung himself on to its back, and untied the silver reins. The men from the castle leapt towards him.

They were just too late. The great horse sprang up into the air, over the heads of the men below.

Tim's horse swung northward, and the others followed. As they left the castle behind them, Tim heard strange cries filling the air. The witches were calling after them, and shaking their fists. But the horses took no notice, and flew on.

Alan rode his horse near to Tim.

"Goodbye, Tim," he called. "I'm going back to the cottage and Grandmother Roon. I shall let the horse go when I get there. The other horses will take you to the Dark Tower. Let them go, too, as soon as you get there. I promised them that you'd let them go. Goodbye, and good luck!"

“Goodbye, Alan, and thank you,” Tim called back, as Alan’s horse swung down towards the lighted windows of the cottage below.

Tim looked round.

Nicola and Jeremy were close behind him. Nicola’s hair was blowing out in the wind, and Jeremy was laughing.

Tim looked up at the stars. He could see the pole star ahead of them. They were flying north.



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